Crisis as Opportunity: Fostering Inclusive Public Engagement in Local Government

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NEW AND MORE ROBUST FORMS OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

In addressing local challenges, such as budget deficits, aging infrastructure, workforce development, opioid addiction, homelessness, and disaster preparedness, a local government must take into account the needs, preferences, and values of its entire community, not just politically active groups.[1] However, research shows that citizens who participate in council meetings or public hearings rarely reflect the diversity of the community in terms of age, race, or opinion, and traditional public comment periods seldom add substantively to local policy decisions.[2] It is therefore clear that reform of public engagement in local governments is long overdue.

An opportunity for such a reform is emerging out of the tragedy of the COVID-19 pandemic. As local governments cope with the crisis, they should strengthen their relationship with their residents by adopting measures that are inclusive and sensitive to all the constituencies in their jurisdiction.

This work starts by communicating clearly both the measures adopted to combat COVID-19 and the guidelines for citizen compliance and by making sure this information is accessible and disseminated throughout the entire community. During the crisis, building trust with the community will also entail restraining from advancing projects that are not instrumental to crisis management, particularly controversial projects. Diligence and prudence during the crisis should create the opportunity to try and test new forms of dialogue with citizens.

These new forms of engagement should increase the legitimacy and public support for government decisions and cultivate a civic culture where residents no longer see themselves as customers vying for services, but as citizens with ownership in the democratic process and its outcomes.[3] In this brief, I propose ways to integrate digital technology tools into those new forms of public engagement.

INTEGRATING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES INTO PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Over the past 15 years a new civic tech industry has emerged to assist local governments with public engagement. Videos and podcasts increase access to guidelines, rules, and procedures published by local governments. Real-time language translation is possible thanks to machine-learning algorithms that are relatively easy to integrate into online help lines. Government web portals increase access to official information, particularly for those with limited mobility or with visual or hearing impairments. These and other digital platforms have the potential to increase citizens' participation, particularly when the costs—such as transportation or childcare—keep people from attending public meetings.

Indeed, tech solutions have the potential to increase citizen participation. During a decade of working with local governments on technology and public engagement, I have observed technologies that promote inclusiveness in public participation and technologies that simply magnify the voice of groups traditionally engaged in politics. Drawing from this experience, I offer local governments and agencies five recommendations to integrate technology into their public engagement programs.

Adopt an Engagement Approach for Each Specific Purpose

Governments need to inform residents about decisions that have already been made. During the COVID-19 crisis, such information relates to extending shelter-in-place orders or defining essential businesses. Governments also need to consult either the broad community or stakeholder groups over proposed initiatives, perhaps to prioritize the concerns of service industry employees who are still working, seniors who cannot go out to get groceries, or families who relied on school districts for childcare. Third, governments need to collaborate with the community to develop ideas, plans, or programs. What will reopening the community look like? What nongovernmental resources can be brought to help strengthen a community in this time of crisis? Government-community collaboration in answering those questions should render the answers more politically stable.

Each of these purposes requires a different approach and results in a different outcome. Table 1 summarizes my findings.

Table 1. Online Engagement Platforms			
PURPOSE	**INFORM**	**CONSULT**	**COLLABORATE**
GOAL	Provide clear, usable information.	Elicit resident opinion or insight.	Facilitate deliberation.
KEY CONSIDERATIONS	easy navigation, attractive graphics, downloadable materials, existing audience	easy navigation, transparency, participants see responses	clearly presented information, users interact with other users' ideas, clear guidelines, ability to moderate forum
PLATFORM EXAMPLES	transparency platforms (e.g., OpenGov, Socrata); social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Nextdoor, Twitter)	survey or voting platforms (e.g., FlashVote, Balancing Act, Polco)	ideation platforms (e.g., Metroquest, Ethelo, Bang the Table, PublicInput)
DESIRED OUTCOME	Transparency: public is informed of what is happening, how resources are being used, etc.	Informed Action: government understands resident priorities and develops responsive policy.	Shared Decisions: public establishes decision-making criteria, recommends or cocreates solutions, or makes final decisions.

Source: Adapted from Ashley Labosier, *Palos Verdes Estates Public Engagement Toolkit* (Malibu, CA: Davenport Institute, 2018).

To Be Inclusive, Provide Different Points of Online Access

Digital tools of engagement should be designed to draw in and reach a more diverse cross section of residents, but they will accomplish these goals effectively only if policymakers have at their disposal a detailed survey of the community's demographic makeup.[4]

Local governments reaching out to younger, lower-income, or more ethnically diverse residents will have greater success enabling access platforms via mobile technology.[5] Having lower-tech opportunities to engage (via phone or SMS) can also help bridge the digital divide. When using social media, research shows that 68 percent of adults age 50–64 and almost half of adults age 65 and older say they use Facebook, while SnapChat and Instagram are broadly used by those in their 20s to 40s. WhatsApp and WeChat tend to have higher percentages of minority users.[6] When possible, it can be helpful to collect demographic data through platforms to see how well participants reflect the community and to help target outreach.

Integrate Online and In-Person Engagement

Democratic government is not generally nimble and adaptable. Both bureaucratic structures and public accountability create a culture that tends to be averse to both risk and change. Yet it is remarkable that local agencies across the United States are adapting rapidly to the COVID-19 crisis.

In Los Angeles, for example, 12 city employees were using the city's web-based telecommuting platform on March 13. By the beginning of April, 11,600 employees were signed up for the platform.[7] Also, local governments are livestreaming public meetings and coming up with creative

engagement solutions such as offering drive-through public comment.[8] This is a good moment for experimentation, regardless of whether that experimentation is high-tech or low-tech.

Still, meeting in person cannot be fully replicated virtually. Local leaders should recognize that online and offline engagement efforts support one another. The current experiments with digital tools of engagement should emphasize a design that supplements, not replaces in-person forms of engagement.

Design Measures to Assess the Effectiveness of Engagement

The purpose of each process commands the approach, and each approach should have a different measuring rod. For example, the number of attendees at a community event or the number of responses to an online survey are easy first approximations. But they should not replace more robust indicators of outcomes, such as how many people were engaged for the first time. Other important outcomes are better assessed in narrative form rather than quantitative measures, such as the increased diversity of feedback or the effectiveness in eliciting new and creative ideas, resources, or solutions.[9]

Too often local leaders seek to ensure that the public "feels heard" without taking its input seriously. When citizens are able to see that their participation resonates in policies and political compromises, they will be encouraged and will deepen their engagement with government.

Cultivate a Culture of Engagement

At its core, inclusive and effective public engagement is not about adopting a new tech platform. It is about changing the culture of local government: recognizing that the goal is not getting the public on board with what the experts have decided it needs, but rather shaping government policies to meet the needs and priorities of the public that they serve.

For both elected and appointed local government leaders, this means recognizing that public engagement is a vital leadership skill. It should be included in job descriptions and policymaking guidelines. Staff should be trained in public engagement and encouraged to try emerging practices. Effective, inclusive engagement ties closely to the good governance principles of ethics, transparency, accountability, equity, and sustainability, and it should be prioritized in this moment of crisis and beyond.

A NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH CITIZENS

In the aftermath of the crisis, local governments will have the opportunity to reconfigure their relationship with their communities. Digital technologies bear the promise of becoming effective

tools in this new compact between the people and their local governments. To this end, these tools must be designed in the service of governments that recognize people as citizens, not customers; emphasize inclusion of traditionally marginalized demographics; and enhance forms of in-person engagement, not replace them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashley Labosier is the executive director of the Davenport Institute at the Pepperdine School of Public Policy. Labosier is a national writer and speaker on issues related to civil discourse, public engagement, and transparency. She codesigned and serves as an instructor for the Professional Certificate in Advanced Public Engagement for Local Government at the Pepperdine School of Public Policy, where she also serves as an adjunct professor for a graduate-level class on public engagement.

NOTES

1. Melody Barnes and Paul Schmitz, "Community Engagement Matters (Now More than Ever)," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Spring 2016): 35.

2. These shortcomings are recognized by government officials themselves. A groundbreaking survey of 900 California elected and appointed local officials' perspectives of public engagement found as far back as 2012 that 76 percent of respondents saw public meetings "typically dominated by people with narrow agendas," and 64 percent said that "public hearings typically attract complainers; . . . they don't give voice to the real public." Carolin Hagelskamp, John Immerwahr, and Jeremy Hess, *Testing the Waters* (San Francisco, CA: Public Agenda, 2013), 11.

3. Judith E. Innes and David E. Booher, *Planning with Complexity: An Introduction to Collaborative Rationality for Public Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 43–58.

4. Simple census data can be a good place to start, particularly those from the American Community Survey: "American Community Survey (ACS)" (database), Census Bureau, accessed April 21, 2020, https://www.census.gov/programs -surveys/acs.

5. Monica Anderson, *Mobile Technology and Home Broadband 2019* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2019).

6. Andrew Perrin and Monica Anderson, "Share of US Adults Using Social Media, Including Facebook, Is Mostly Unchanged since 2018," *Fact Tank*, Pew Research Center, April 10, 2019.

7. Stephanie Kanowitz, "From 12 to 12,000: How LA Scaled Up Telework in Two Weeks," *GCN*, April 2, 2020.

8. Alicia Robinson, "Drive-up and Call-in Public Input? How Coronavirus Is Changing Access to Local Government," *Orange County Register*, April 6, 2020.

9. The Institute for Local Government offers a useful resource for helping local agencies evaluate their engagement efforts: Institute for Local Government, *Measuring the Impact of Local Public Engagement*, March 2015.